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DEA Quizzed in '73 Plot on Torrijos

Gen. Omar Torrijos, now in the center of a controversy involving the shah of Iran, was the intended victim of an alleged assassination plot in 1973. In December 1977, I reported "shadowy rumors" that Watergate plotters had marked the Panamanian for assassination.

Now, a long-buried Justice Department document discloses that high officials of the Drug Enforcement Administration were investigated for possible involvement in the alleged Watergate-era plot to assassinate Torrijos.

Those suspected of involvement have either made emphatic denials or refused to comment, and no prosecutions ever resulted from the investigation. Yet the Justice Department has refused to turn the potentially explosive document over to Congress.

The report was submitted by Michael Defeo, head of a three-man Justice Department team assigned by then-Attorney General Edward Levi in 1975 to "investigate allegations of fraud, irregularity and misconduct" in the DEA during the Nixon administration. The Defeo Report was in effect a confidential briefing for Justice Department officials in handling congressional inquiries about DEA.

The alleged assassination plot supposedly aborted in 1973 after Congress began looking into the Watergate scandals.

The Defeo Report notes that the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations "inquired into reports that Phillip Smith and William Durkin participated in discussions within DEA regarding a proposal to assassinate the president of Panama, who was suspected of being involved in drug trafficking."

From the careful wording of the re-

port, it is not clear whether the DEA discussions concerned an agency proposal to kill Torrijos or someone else's plot. In fact, the report notes that "Smith stated that he had not participated in any such discussion but had developed information of a plot to kill Gen. Torrijos." Defeo added that Smith said his information was "quickly transmitted to the CIA for transmittal to the Republic of Panama," and that the plot "had been verified and neutralized."

However, the Defeo Report goes on to say: "It was alleged that a discussion concerning assassination involved the possibility of killing Mr. Noryago, the principal assistant to the president of Panama, and that Smith and William Durkin actually proposed that he be killed."

When contacted by my reporter Sally Ann Denton, Smith referred all questions to the Justice Department. Durkin denied any participation in a plot to kill Torrijos, and said he wasn't even a member of the Special Operations branch of DEA, which was the target of the Defeo investigation.

What's interesting is that the DEA, which did not figure in the assassination stories at the time, had recently become a repository for CIA alumni. Lucian Conein, a colorful ex-CIA operative, was named by the White House in 1972 as head of DEA's Special Operations. He promptly recruited 14 CIA colleagues for his 19-member undercover team at the drug agency, according to the Defeo Report.

Besides the reference to assassination, the Defeo Report listed more than 20 allegations of misconduct at DEA. They include a covert intelligence project in the Caribbean, use of "certain non-con-

ventional investigative techniques" in Panama, improper involvement with gambling interests in Las Vegas, and a questionable relationship between DEA personnel and Intertel, a private security firm.

Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.) tried to investigate the charges listed in the suppressed report, which Justice has refused to give him. DeConcini is concerned at the lack of evidence that anyone at DEA was ever disciplined, and is not convinced that the alleged misconduct has been cleaned up.

The Defeo Report was a closely guarded secret from the start. A secret memo dated March 28, 1976, notes that at a meeting of Levi and his top aides, it was "decided that we should continue to resist disclosing to Congress any portion of the Defeo Report being reviewed for possible criminal or administrative action." No such action was ever taken.

Meanwhile, Conein has risen even higher in the DEA hierarchy, and is now in charge of "strategic intelligence." Durkin is retired. Smith left the DEA to work for Intertel, and is now setting up a surveillance system for the Great Bay Casino in Atlantic City.

Another of the DEA spooks was not so fortunate. Santo Bario, who was involved in DEA's Operation Croupier—penetration of gambling interests, recently died under disputed circumstances. A congressional source, who demanded anonymity, said "Bario was the man who knew too much."

Footnote: Asked about a possible DEA assassination plot against Torrijos, Conein laughed uproariously. "That's not my watch," he said. "I know nothing about it. That's fantastic. I don't know what you're talking about."